STARTLED AGAIN

December 1, 1985, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

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Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Text: "Take heed, watch; for you do not know when the time will come."
--Mark 13:33 (RSV)

Scripture

Jeremiah 33:14-16
Mark 13:32-37

In what does our humanity reside? What makes us human?

Is it our wonderful prehensile thumb...?

Our ability to use tools...?

Is it our conscience or our logic? There are, of course, libraries on the topic. There are terribly sophisticated and complicated answers and there are very simple ones.

May I propose that at least part of the answer to the question, "What makes us human?" is that we are watchers and waiters? We know there is more to this business of life than meets the eye...and we are not very good, therefore, at accepting the status quo. We don't live very easily with limits. We can't accept injustice, unfairness, suffering as necessary. We live with the expectation that life can be and will be better tomorrow than it is today.

Personally, where we live and have our private being, we come with a built-in longing for that which our lives do not seem capable of producing with much consistency -- peace, wholeness, a sense of at-homeness, -- salvation -- if you will.

Augustine was right. We have been created restless until we find our rest in God, or in something. In the meantime the waiting and watching have been going on for more than 2,500 years. Alone in creation we human beings are born, it seems, with a feeling of incompleteness and a sense of hopeful anticipation. And so, from the beginning we have been watching and waiting for God to make it right, for hope to be fulfilled, for all the promises to be kept. For centuries our forebearers in faith have been watching and waiting for the day of the Lord. It is one of the great ideas in the Bible and it is there from the beginning. When God's people are in exile in Babylon, separated from home, family, culture and most of all from the certainty that God is in heaven and all is right with the world, they are spending their time watching and waiting for God to put things right.

The prophet Jeremiah wrote to them, "Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promose." -- Jeremiah 33:14

The watching has been going on for more than 2,500 years. The idea occurs consistently in the secular literature of our civilization. Two of the most famous watchers and waiters are Vladimir and Estragon, the tragic-comic figures in Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot. An article in the Sunday Times two weeks ago on Beckett reminded me again of what an experience in exasperation it can be to read that play. The two characters talk relentless nonsense: a flow of thought begins to develop and is suddenly terminated by an irrelevant interruption and is never picked up again. Godot never comes, of course. Playgoers become uneasy, restless, sometimes angry -- which is the point. At the play's American opening in Miami -- several decades ago -- a third of the audience left at intermission. Those who stay put, or read on, however, gradually realize an accumulation of religious ideas, that Jesus is mentioned a lot: so is crucifixion and salvation: that the name Godot isn't far from God, after all, and that perhaps the absurdity of the conversations is a paradigm for modern human life. In the Times article I mentioned, the author, who directed the play, had asked Beckett who or what Godot is supposed to be. "Beckett stared off in space for a while and then answered, 'If I knew, I would have said so in the play.'" (NYT Magazine, 11/17/85)

Waiting for Godot is generally recognized to be one of the important plays of our time. Beckett's irritating brilliance is in helping us to see that to be human is to watch and wait for something -- someone -- to bring salvation. If only Godot would come everything would be all right, everything would make sense. Beckett tantalizes his audience with the suggestion that Godot has already come and that Vladimir and Estragon have missed him, or that Godot will never come and that the waiting and watching are all there is to life.

Is it merely a literary exercise? The importance of Waiting for Godot is precisely in the universality of the experience it portrays. To wait and to watch is to be human. The form in which it is expressed is often a rebellion at the incompleteness of life as it is...in this decade, we are calling the experience a "mid-life crisis." We are waiting for life -- full, satisfying, happy, joyful human life. We're waiting for it to happen. We're putting in time, days and weeks and months and years on the assumption that some day it may happen to us. And then, for a significant number at least, somewhere around the middle of the journey we conclude that "it" isn't going to happen, whatever "it" is. Godot is not going to show up.

Near the end of the powerful movie, Testament, the mother (played by Jane Alexander), who along with her sons and all her neighbors is dying of radiation sickness after a nuclear explosion in California, walks to the football field and stands watching as the bodies of the dead are lifted into the burning pyre. She breaks down finally, falls to her knees, picks up two hands full of dirt, and like countless people before her -- from Job to Isiah -- cries out: "Who did this to us? Damn you! Who did this?"

It is the oldest lament in history. It is the negative expression of the watching and waiting we have been doing for thousands of years. The prophet pled --

"O that thou wouldst rend the heavens and come down...
To make thy name known to thy adversaries."
Do something God! Come and make it right."

One time, near the end of his life, Jesus talked to his followers about God coming into the life of the world and into their lives. The discourse occupies the entire 13th chapter of Mark's Gospel and it is regularly subjected to gross oversimplification and shoddy misuse. There has always been a fascination with the end of the age. There was in Jesus' day when some knew the end was near. Two thousand years later the fascination continues, almost obsessively for some. It has always been a product of our innate hope for the future -- and, I think, our innate morbidity: more the latter than the former frequently. It was then Secretary of the Interior, James Watt, who allowed as how efforts to conserve the environment for future generations were a waste of time because the end of the world was upon us. It is sobering to be reminded that the all-time religious best seller is not John Calvin's The Institute of the Christian Religion, or Reinhold Niebuhr's The Nature and Destiny of Man, or Paul Tillich's Systematic Theology, but Hal Lindsey's The Late Great Planet Earth which discusses the imminent end of the world. It is sobering to learn how lucrative it is to preach about the cataclysmic and imminent end of history and then to invest one's royalties in long-term growth investments.

It is hard to pin Jesus down in Mark 13. He will not be confined to our favorite religious obsession. Rather his clearest word to his followers was to be alert -- watchful. The future, he told them, is in God's hands: all things ultimately will be put right, reconciled and made whole. There is a destiny -- a direction -- to this business. One day all crying will cease, the tears will be wiped away, death will be no more and the whole creation will sing for joy. And when that happens or begins to happen -- when a bit of it breaks into the life of the world -- the disciples of Jesus ought to know enough to recognize it.

We need an Advent season to get us ready because people do have a way of missing God's activity. Jesus told them to watch because they, like us, have a way of looking right at it and not seeing it. Advent is a time to recall the part of the story which is about human dullness and shortsightedness: to recall that in the case of the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, the overwhelming majority of people in the immediate vicinity didn't notice it. Advent is a time for an annual admonition we all need, namely to watch, be alert, anticipate God's coming.

Faith, in the Bible, can often be described as waiting in anticipation, waiting in full confidence that God will come. Faith is willing to wait in the darkness. Faith is willing to stand by the side of one who is dying, without giving up hope, and without despairing when death comes anyway. Faith is waiting in hopeful anticipation through the dark night of personal disappointment and depression, knowing that God will be there somewhere. Faith is never giving up on one's dreams. That is a powerful dynamic. That hopeful waiting, rather than putting in time before the end, is a creative and Christ-filled force in human history. Halford Luckock once called people of faith "Sentinel souls who make possible the liberation of humankind from ancient wrong. Nothing really great ever happened without a great many lives lived in expectation." (A Sprig of Holly, p. 46)

The world will become a better place because the scientist stays at it day after day, believing in and anticipating a resolution to the problem of safe nuclear energy. The world will be better because there are medical researchers ready to spend their lives in the pursuit for a cure to malignancy. Future human life will be more full because brave doctors and brave patients anticipate the ultimate success of heart transplants and artificial organs. The future will be better because there are people of hope among us who do not and will not accept injustice, inequality or the oppression of any group of people by any other group of people. Our future as individuals is possible because someone once was confident that we might turn out all right. Sustained human relationships are only possible because someone believes in the redemptive potential of the future. Human life now is more full because people don't despair but go at their lives and responsibilities, whatever they are, day in and day out, in full expectation that things will come together, that everything will be all right.

The posture of faith is not mindless, naive optimism, but hard-working, steady anticipation. The spirit of Advent is anticipation, watchfulness for the Lord's coming, and joy when it happens: when after several years of thunderous silence, a summit happens and Russian and American heads of state are talking once again, and words like arms control, freeze, disarmament and peace are spoken again -- out loud, in public -- by politicians: or when suddenly old wounds heal and newness is born in our intimate relationships: or when tired old personal goals are put aside and suddenly there are new and better ones.

The spirit of Advent is a willingness to be startled by newness. And a resultant determination not to give up on humanity's fondest hopes for peace, for an end to war, for food for all, for a rebirth of humanness that transcends every selfish inclination. The spirit of Advent is a willingness to be startled again by the creative, life-giving presence of God in the world and in our lives.

We have been here before, on this First Sunday in our most lovely, most hopeful season. We know by heart the story we are about to hear. But the reality to which it points is always startling when it happens. God came in a humble birth. God comes in joy and hope celebrated. God comes in human love expressed. And -- God comes in bread broken and a cup shared.

Watch -- for you do not know when the time will come. Amen.